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ABSTRACT

This discussion of factors influencing youth literacy in Ukraine highlights information on availability and content of reading material in the Soviet Union and Ukraine. The population of Ukraine is 100% literate. Regional children's libraries and separate libraries for youth are located in the cities and larger towns, are funded by the Ministry of Culture, and have impressive children's collections. The libraries for youth (defined as children from ages 14 to 24) offer a basic selection of all classics--their own and foreign, some adventure, and some science fiction--although the selections are not always what the young people really want to read. In the Ukraine, there is a lack of a middle level entertainment or escapist literature for youth. There are many levels of fiction, non-fiction, biography, and travelogue that would interest and entertain Ukrainian youth. Ukrainian youth are curious about themselves and the outside world. They read a lot, which helps them to search for a synthesis of diametrically opposed influences of their sheltered past and the modern Western world. Writers, poets, and bards were of great importance to Ukrainian youth in the past, and will continue to be important in the future. (Contains 10 references.) (Author/SWC)

Young Adult Reading Habits in Ukraine

by
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When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, life in each of the former constituent republics proceeded on its own course. Although intellectual life in each one of them was marked deeply by the imprints of the common Soviet experience, their own particular characteristics are the determinants of present and future developments. Some of the steps taken in the de-Sovietization process are firmly rooted, some are experimental. New orientations and polarizations have become visible. The ecological and economic problems seem insurmountable. These are difficult but interesting times and the events of the last decade were perhaps without historic precedent. Literacy was and is a vital, perhaps deciding factor in these developments. Gorbachev's policy of glasnost which began the process was,first and foremost, the release, or at least partial release, of information and of cultural life from government controls. The floodgate had opened. If one only considers that in the years 1988 to 1991, some 900 new periodicals appeared in the former Soviet Union, one cannot underestimate the importance of the printed word and the power of literacy.

It is most ironic that in a state which, in its beginnings, had placed a high value on literacy, people felt such a hunger for information. When Lenin was forming that state, he projected to create a model society of the proletariat, the working class. The largely illiterate masses were to be made literate. This was achieved within two decades and proved to be the greatest and most long reaching achievement of the whole experiment. Lenin entrusted the supervision of this work to his wife, N. Krupskaia, and to the Education Minister, A.V.Lunacharsky. Success was made possible by three factors: free education, a zealous movement of the young and ideologically fervent to go and teach reading and writing to the masses, and by the establishment of free libraries. The high degree of literacy among the people of the U.S.S.R. was regularly underscored by UNESCO statistics. A broader study by M.V. Kabatchenko and L.D. Yaskunikova in one UNESCO publication, *Eradicating Illiteracy in the USSR. Literary Lessons* published in 1990, confirms this high degree of Soviet literacy.[1]

Certain aspects of this success story must be qualified, however. With utilitarian purposes in mind, with its Marxist view of education, with radically new values, Soviet leadership produced a new and specific type of a literate person. The stress on technologies and communist ideology produced the new *Soviet man*. This *homo sovieticus* did, indeed, know how to read and write. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, however, did not even camouflage the utilitarian purpose of this newfound literacy in the building of the socialist state.

Several Western scholars were interested in Soviet literacy and studied its characteristics. Some rejected Soviet statistics as untrustworthy, and it should be mentioned that UNESCO reports were based on Soviet sources. Maurice Friedberg, of the University of Illinois, was very skeptical of the Soviet claim of universal literacy. In his book, *Russian Culture of the 1980s,* he wrote, "Total liquidation of illiteracy belongs in the same category of claims as the non-existence of unemployment and, as an underground song of the 1960s mocked, the abolition of diabetes by law."[2]

Klaus Mehnert, and two British scholars, Jenny Brine and Gregory Walker, also researched Soviet readership and tried to determine how much and what the Soviet citizen read. In 1988, John Garrard and Amy Corning published the results of their study, "The Soviet Reader: New Data from the Soviet Interview Project."[3] This was interesting new information, based on interviews with about one thousand participants. Its drawback, which the authors acknowledged, was the fact that the study was done in the United Kingdom, on information gathered from a population of mostly Jewish emigrants who were very well educated, and thus, atypical of the general population. Due to the circumstances which existed in the Soviet Union, it was not easy to question the Soviet citizen in his own element, and to

obtain good information. Times have changed and new studies will certainly be forthcoming.

As it made its population literate, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union ensured for itself the right to control everything which pertained to literacy. Collectivization of lands and properties, achieved at the price of famines and Gulags, was paralleled by a systematic destruction of many of the most literate, the intellectuals. Traditionally considered to be a separate social class, the *intelligentsia*, as it was called, was seen as threatening to what was to be a classless society.

Especially dangerous was the *creative intelligentsia*, among whom the most numerous were the writers. Those who survived the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, had the choice of total conformity or silence. Conformity, for a good writer or artist was synonymous with reduction to banality. The excellent Ukrainian poet, Pavlo Tychyna, for example, wrote so differently after making concessions to the Party, that literary history speaks of him as of two people, the young Tychyna of the poem *Clarinets of the Sun* and the other Tychyna, of trivia and of panegyrics to Stalin. There were also chosen or imposed silences. The Russian poet, Anna Akhmatova, survived physically after writing her powerful *Requiem*, but did not publish again. In the times of Brezhnev, the most important contemporary Ukrainian lyricist, Lina Kostenko, was silent for more than ten years. Much literature was written "to be kept in the drawer," without hope of being read.

The various measures of control at the disposal of the Party frustrated and distorted the normal development of literature, historiography and even the sciences. The *intellectual workers*, to use the Soviet term, like those of collective farms and factories became part of their respective *kolektyvs*, of which the best known were the writers' unions.

Recalling these circumstances, one can appreciate the fact that the newly acquired literacy represented a dilemma for the Soviet citizen. The less individualism, the less asking of questions and searching for answers there was, the safer their lives would be. The government, with the many means it had at its disposal, monitored what was to be read at several levels, especially by controlling the publishing and distributions of materials. It should, perhaps, be mentioned that librarians were asked to keep the so-called *psychological profiles* of readers and thus they also contributed to these controls. The pastime of reading could prove to be dangerous.

Nevertheless, even in such an atmosphere, reading was a popular activity. Turning to UNESCO statistics, our best source of comparative information on the matter, we find how they regularly underscored this high degree of readership in the USSR. Books, were inexpensive and private home collections grew in spite of the crowded living quarters. Much was written about the "prestigiousness" of books in the USSR. and Valeria D. Stelmakh stressed it her 1982 study *Books and the Mass Media: Modes of Interaction in the USSR*.[4] In comparison to other societies, Soviet citizens were, indeed, avid readers. The popularity of the book was not challenged until the massive invasion of Soviet homes by television sets, in the seventies and eighties.

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which authorized every item published, inundated its citizens with the printed word. Much of it, however, was not what the reader would have liked to read. In *Living with Glasnost: Youth and Society in Changing Russia*, the authors refer to a survey taken in 1986:

"Only six out of then young people saw any real chance of developing their creative talents, and only half found their leisure to be of any cultural value. Two thirds complained that they could not get the books they wanted."[5] After the year 1988, even librarians admitted that their vast collections were rich in materials which no one wanted to read and that they were losing their readers.

As in the world of physics where for every action there is a reaction, Soviet readers acquired special skills to recognize the more interesting publications, to read "between the lines" of others. They learned to decode newspaper articles, to look for the really important news on the last page. Sometimes people stood in line to buy a book and sometimes they copied items, by hand and passed it on to others. This was especially true of poetry. Occasionally, a book could enjoy a demand equal to that of a pair of jeans or other highly desirable goods. Bulgakov's novel *The Devil and Margarita* even drew very respectable prices on the black market, for example. Unwillingly, Soviet controls of the printed word, cultivated a public eager to read that what the government only tolerated. Many even risked to read the forbidden, the underground publications, known collectively as *samvydav* in Ukrainian or *samizdat* in Russian.

This general background is important

when one concentrates on the subject of literacy of youth in Ukraine, as it is now, and on the factors which influenced it. A study of the reading habits of youth in a reforming society is to study a bubbling process. It is, of necessity, impressionistic, yet it may provide an insight into that society, facilitate analogies with others and help in better understanding of Eastern Europe, in general.

The population of Ukraine is one hundred percent literate, according to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.[6] This means that every person between the ages of nine and forty-nine knows how to read and write.

The youth of what was the second largest republic of the Soviet Union, was affected by all the above-mentioned factors and it had several additional problems of their own. Some of the first printing in the cyrillic alphabet appeared in 1574, in its territory. Yet, the collective memory of the people holds the fact that in the nineteenth century, in the eastern and larger part of Ukraine which was part of tsarist Russia, there had been a prohibition of the Ukrainian printed word,[7] The Ukrainian book went underground and had to be published in Western Ukraine or even in Geneva or Vienna, and to be circulated illegally.[8]

As citizens of the Soviet Union, they saw the systematic attempt to let their culture, as well as that of several other non-Russian republics, atrophy. Lenin's theories of a multinational state had given assurances of equal blossoming of languages and cultures of all of the republics, but the reality was different. What could not be destroyed was destined to fade away into ethnographic quaintness.

The Ukrainian youth of today have many problems. They did not inherit a culture which had developed normally. The metaphor "stumps and sprouts" which serves as title for an anthology of poetry, can refer to the whole culture. The periods of *thaws* and *freezes* of control which characterized Soviet history, devastated culture. If Russians today are taking stock of the damages which their culture endured in the Soviet times, the other nations suffered all those and in addition, the heavy marks of Russification. This policy consisted in a reduction or at least strong attempt to reduce the cultures of half of the population of the Soviet Union to a second-rateness. We in the Western world who have been made sensitive by the theories of Claude Levi-Strauss on the validity of cultures, can appreciate the losses and the psychological damages of such marginalization.

It was practiced in various subtle, and some not too subtle, ways. All aspects of culture fell victim to it, especially the language. Besides being the official language of state, Russian was aggressively imposing itself in all aspects of life. The numbers of publications in Ukrainian decreased constantly, as those in Russian increased. All too often, a translation of a French or English novel into Ukrainian usually had to be done from a Russian translation rather than from the original. Russification was imposed methodically, and to oppose it was very dangerous, for how could one oppose the "language of Lenin"

Ukrainian youth, as all other non-Russian youth in the USSR, are bi-lingual. They usually read in two languages, their own and Russian. The study of other foreign languages has proven inadequate and, at the present time, there is a great demand for English, German and French. Of these English, is the most desirable. Since the Rolling Stones and the Beatles had made holes in the "iron curtain," in the sixties, enough pop and rock music has seeped through to whet their appetite for things foreign. Rock music, blue jeans, T-shirts, and other influences of the American youth culture are omnipresent.

The Soviet education system had assured a basic ten-year program for all but those who were directed to trade schools after the eighth grade. It had well defined goals which were best served by a single textbook methodology, a heavy reliance on memorization and strong control of discussion in class. The importance of school libraries was not accented. The school librarian, typically an elderly woman, was in charge of the distribution of textbooks. The collection was usually small and contained only some popular classics. When one remembers that it had to serve students from the age of seven to seventeen, it is quite understandable that such a library was not too popular. Among the twenty persons interviewed on the subject, not one had a positive memory by their school library.

Much more prestigious and interesting places were and are the institutions called the regional children's libraries for younger children and the separate libraries for youth. They are in the cities and larger towns which serve as the twenty five regional centers of Ukraine. They were funded by the Ministry of Culture and many of them were the showplaces which were proudly shown to visiting foreign delegations.

They are very much enjoyed by their patrons although access to these libraries was often limited by the traveling distance. The collections for children are impressive.

In the libraries for youth the selections were not always what the young people would have really wanted to read, but they did offer the basic menu of all classics, their own and foreign, some adventure literature and science fiction. The popular Americans were James Fennimore Cooper, Jack London, Hemingway, and Theodore Dreiser. Conan Doyle, Georges Simenon and Agatha Christie were very much liked by the mystery fans.

It should be remembered that the whole of Soviet society was kept free of ideologically unacceptable materials. Until the last years of the existence of the state, it was quite puritanical in sexual matters. Thus books legally available to youth were always proper in these respects. Pornography was illegal material. Today, however, there seems to be a high demand for it and there is a good supply. Most is imported, but some is home grown. A touch of urbaneness which would have previously been rejected as contamination by the "decadent West," now characterizes many publications addressed to the general public.

At this point it would perhaps be helpful to explain the designation of the term "youth." From about the age of fourteen a child was considered a youth. The outer limit of this category is somewhat more difficult to determine and it could extend to about the age of twenty-four. At the same time it should be noted that, when compared to young persons of the same age, young people in all of Eastern Europe tend to be more mature, more serious. That perception of maturity and seriousness needs to be qualified.

Typically, that youth is a keener observer of the political and social scene. On the issue of ecological matters, a study by Ivan D. Zverev published in 1984, two years before Chornobyl, found that an overwhelming majority displayed a high degree of social maturity in their assessment of the problems of man's use and abuse of nature.[9]

At the same time that youth did not always show an equal degree of personal maturity. In "Put in a Word for the Poor Student,"[10] Vladimir Afanasief described a general attitude of dependency among the student population. This was, perhaps, an inevitable result of several factors. Education was free and the student even received a stipend from the state. Secondly, there was little employment opportunity for young people. Finally, the general practice of early marriages, combined with the fact of housing shortages, forced the young to remain dependent on their parents for a long time.

Compared with their counterparts in the West, young people in Ukraine, read more. Recently, since 1988, they read even more. Whole new worlds have opened to them. Within their own world, the primary interest seemed to be to restore history, to fill in the *white spots* or forbidden topics. Soviet manipulation of history was so blatant, that a common cynical witticism which circulated claimed that "the Soviet Union was the only country in the world with an unpredictable past." Wilson and Bachmatov observed, "Generations of young people were systematically kept ignorant of the darker pages of Soviet history. Schools gave them the version of the moment, while parents who were witnesses or victims, generally kept silent."[11]

The guarded but progressive rehabilitation of authors who had been proscribed began in 1988. At the same time, some of the best and the worst of what the West has to offer was made available to them. This is an interesting time in which they have to rediscover their past and to open themselves towards the outside world simultaneously. It would be impossible to study the tastes and habits of a whole stratum of society without recognizing differences. Of course some young people read a lot, some a little, and some not at all. Most reading falls into the sphere of mass culture which affects everyone. Some aspects of literacy, by its very nature, involve more selective readers.

In 1968, the prominent and prolific writer, Oles Honchar published a novel titled *Sobor*, translated as *The Cathedral*. The novel enjoyed two editions in Ukraine and four outside of the country and left a profound mark on the youth of today.

Its action takes place in an industrial town of south-eastern Ukraine. An old church, which survived as a storage place for fodder, is marked for destruction by local bureaucrats. The most aggressive of these, a young jurist, is opposed by the student, Mykola Bahlai. Bahlai and his friends rally to prevent the demolition. They see in this old structure an old witness to the continuum of the life of a people and an expression of their gravitation towards the good and the beautiful. In the novel, there is no religious sentiment expressed, although Elka, a

girl of somewhat easy virtue, does go through a moral conversion in the shadow of that structure.

The powerful symbol of the old *sobor*, even defamed and closed as it was, cost the author his leadership in the Writer's Union of Ukraine, but it inspired the next generation. They identified with the young metallurgy student, Bahlai, who on his way home from the institute would stop on the square, "turn his head upwards and, as was his habit, would listen to the *sobor*, to its silence, and would hear that music of the spheres which is not audible to everyone."[12]

"Take care of the *sobors* of your souls,"[13] the author warned. The message found a resonance with many of the young. A rich, philosophical commentary on it, *Sobor under Scaffolding* by the critic E. Sverstiuk circulated as underground literature and increased the parameters of the influence of the novel. There is a subtle but clear continuum in progress. The young lyrical poet, Sofia Maidanska titled her 1993 collection *You Too, Enter This Sobor*.

Another important novelist and poet who shared with his reader and particularly the young reader, a very personal and spiritual world view was Oles Berdnyk. He wrote novels in a particular genre of science fiction. His *fantastyka*, as it was called, was rich in idealistic musings and represents a search for truth and virtue within the human being. His personal biography included two terms of imprisonment and exile. He was active in the Ukrainian Helsinki Group which tried to monitor the Soviet government's adherence to the international agreements on human rights which it had signed in Helsinki, in 1976. He exuded the aura of a moral leader. Even his striking appearance became emblematic of the guru or prophet that youth which had been raised in the spirit of dialectic materialism needed very much.

At some point his writing was forced underground and four of his novels appeared in the West and exerted their influence from the outside. Berdnyk fired the imagination of youth with a particular *back to the future* vision. His spirituality consisting of millenarism, futurism and extreme idealism rather than religious concepts, seemed to offer something unique and to compensate for whatever the youth was missing.

> "Burst into flames.
> The radiation from your hearts is needed.
> Don't pass through life, like shadows,
> Like meteors into the unknown.
> And let new stars appear
> In the dark skies!
> For, as one sun fades, another one rises,
> As one planet dies, another sets out on its course!
> All of the atoms resemble each other,
> And irreplaceable is only the human soul...."[14]

A genuine idealism of youth broke through as one of the first signs of freedom permitted by glasnost. It became visible in what they read, in what they wrote and even in their organized movements. It should not be surprising that, as children of the Chornobyl tragedy Ukrainian youth rallied around the cause of ecology. In the various movements to save the planet, from informal ones to an organized political party, known as the Green Party, they vent their frustration and anger at this cataclysmic accident.

As the parameters for political expression increased, youth, particularly the students, organized, published their own press and drew up their own demands of the government. In October of 199O, the students' tent-village in the center of Kiev was an unprecedented event. Their platform, their hunger strike, their good behavior won the sympathy of the people and concessions from the government. What should not be forgotten was that in that eleventh hour of the Soviet government, they were very vulnerable indeed, and could easily have been arrested. They put their lives at risk and were prepared for even the extreme measures of suicide. The government, thought it more expedient to act democratically and acquiesced to their demands. The triumph of this event gave a great moral uplift to the participants and to all youth.[15]

In the Soviet Union, youth always had its own press, that ispress addressed to them. These were official publications, and some of them were quite large, as for example the newspaper *Molod Ukrainy (Youth of Ukraine)* which came out in the city of Kharkiv, five times per week, in huge runs of 750,000 with a counterpart published in Russian in runs of 250,000. Such dreary press was the reason why so many new periodicals were established after 1988. Youth, more than anyone else even needed their own freer press and a vibrant and

vital journalism mushroomed at the first opportunity. In the days of *glasnost*, at the age of 24, Aleksander Kryvenko had published a semi-legal newspaper which survived for about a year and half, with about 20,000 subscribers. Recently it reemerged and is of great interest to the general public. The original name *Postup, (Progress)* has been changed to *Post-Postup.*

In the last several years, the general press is getting more diverse. Young people were finding in it more and more of what was of interest to them. A landmark event was the publication of the January 1991 issue of a monthly journal named *Suchasnist (Contemporariness).* It contained the novella, *Reaktsii (Reactions)* by an excellent author, Yurii Andruchovych. Even ninth and tenth graders were reading it, passing it along, paying high prices for a copy. If many of the older generation were shocked by this new type of realism, the youth loved its urbaneness and recognized their own language and their slang in it.

The wish to know the West and to belong to the rest of the world is very strong after so much isolation. They imitate, adapt and they create original art. Normally music would be a field quite apart from literacy, but the nature of the *estradna muzyka* which became popular in the late 1980s legitimizes its inclusion.

On intimate stages and in large stadiums, there blossomed a genre which was both music and literature. It can be best described as poetry which became music. Its creators, popularly referred to as *bardy* or bards, are young people who reached into various sources pop, rock, jazz and folk music and produced several types of songs which broke the stereotype of romantic sentimentality to which Ukrainian songs had been reduced. Their satire is courageous and biting. Both the humor and the pain these songs express draw the people around them. These bards are Victor Morozov, Andrii Panchyshyn, Taras Chubai and several others. Most make social or political statements, while some, especially the songs authored by Stefan Vorobets, border on erotica. The usual accompaniment was the guitar or the bandura, but there were also drums, synthesizer and all the trappings of rock groups. The concerts and the three festivals of this music, in 1989, 1991 and 1993, were truly festivals of an unleashed spirit. Whatever they may represent musically, they feature poetry which wants to be louder and to extend itself to more people. The next festival in the series will take place in 1995.

A more exclusive, but also "staged" vehicle for the written word for Ukrainian youth today is the theater. The traditional youth theaters, or theaters of the young viewer, as they are called, serve the younger adults. They became the venue for literary events and, as such, have to be mentioned. The "Molodizhnyi Teater" (Youth Theater) of Lviv, for example, introduced its audiences to major works, which the poet Lina Kostenko held secret during the ten years of her silence. *Marusia Churai*, based on the historic epos of the seventeenth century, was very popular and successful, as was the *Garden of Unmelting Statues.* In the tradition of all of Eastern Europe, poetry readings are cultural events of great importance. It is from the stage of that theater that the youth of the city of Lviv, first heard the poetry of Vasyl Stus, a martyred young genius who died in Siberia, in 1984. For the youth of Ukraine, the theater is an extension of what they read, an integral part of their literacy.

When asked what they most enjoyed reading, a typical young man or woman would usually name historical fiction. Two favorite authors are Roman Ivanychuk and Pavlo Zahrebelny. Their works, often serialized in the journals before they appear in book form, are avidly read by all. Also, the young people genuinely like Fennimore Cooper, Balzac, Dumas and Maupassant and seem to have a deeper understanding of them compared to our youth. Raised with a reverence for the classics, their own and foreign, they are able to draw more out of these authors and to appreciate them more.

If it appears that Ukrainian youth is "high brow" in its reading habits, it is due to the fact that there was and still is a lack of other good literature. There is little adventure fiction or interesting biography, few mystery novels or travelogues. There was and is a high demand for translations of American best-sellers. The journal *Vsesvit (The Universe)* serialized Mario Puzo's *The Godfather.* Irving Shaw's *Rich Man, Poor Man* was very popular also, as was *Thornbirds* which appeared in print after the film made its rounds. In other words, they are avid readers of "lower brow" materials, if they can get it.

The current practice of "video piratstvo," the copying of foreign video cassettes has, in the last years, made the American film accessible to the public. Legal impropriety notwithstanding, this procedure finally offers them something other than the "B" films which they were

supplied with before, and thus, gives them a better knowledge of American culture.

In making an assessment of what is read or not read by youth in Ukraine today, it becomes clear that there is a lack of a middle level, entertainment or escapist literature. Between the iconostasis of the classics, and the triviality of pornography there are many levels of fiction, non-fiction, biography or travelogue which would interest and entertain them. It is a void which needs to be filled.

They are curious about themselves and the outside world. They read a lot and this reading helps them to search for a synthesis of diametrically opposed influences of their sheltered past and the modern Western world. The culture which they inherit has been frustrated in its growth and needs healing. There are many stumps but the new shoots are vigorous and healthy. Writers, poets and bards were of great importance to them in the past, and will certainly be with them in the future.

ENDNOTES

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7 The Ems Ukase of 1976, signed by tsar Alexander II.

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12 *Khrestomatiia Tysiacholittia Khreschennia Rusi-Ukrainy*. Philadelphia, Toronto: S.K. V. O.R., 1986. p.227. (Transl. by C.S.)

13 Berdnyk, Oles. *Blakytnii Kniaz Poezii*. (The Blue Prince Poems) New York: Smolo-skyp, 1975. (Transl. by C.S.)

14 Ibid.

15 The four demands were the insistence on the resignation of the prime minister Masol, on a multi-party basis of government, on military service only on the territory of Ukraine and on the nationalization of the Communist Party of Ukraine.

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